THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS (SHRI KAMAL NATH): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir.

(c) and (d) Some of the zoos in India have inadequate veterinary infrastructure due to not having qualified Veterinary Officers on such posts lying vacant. Indian Veterinary Research Institute is taking steps to start a nine months Course for veterinarian on veterinary aspects of wildlife management. Central Zoo Authority is evaluating various zoos and the country in submitting recommendations for the improvement of the zoos which also cover the aspect of veterinary care.

Decline in forest cover area

416. SHRI KRISHAN LAL SHARMA: Will the Minister of ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that according to reliable data, India is losing its forest area at the rate of 3.7 million acres a year;

(b) if so, the approximate acres of forest cover lost during the five years;

(c) whether Government have made any efforts to check this rate of fall in forest area; and

(d) if so, the details thereof and the progress achieved?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS (SHRI KAMAL NATH): (a) No, Sir.

(b) Does not arise.

(c) and (d) India was loosing forest cover at an average rate of 47,500 ha. annually in the early eighties, but, since the past few years the forest cover is on the increase. By the year 1993 (which is the latest assessment) there was a total net increase of 58,200 ha. in the forest cover, as compared to the position in 1987.

This was possible due to:

— Change in National Forest Policy

— Rigorous implementation of Forest (Conservation) Act and Wildlife (Protection) Act.

— Large scale afforestation under 20 Point Programme.

US Commerce Secretary's Press Conference

417. SHRI K. R. MALKANI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the US Commerce Secretary Mr. Ron Brown held his Press Conference in New Delhi in the open in front of Rashtrapati Bhawan;

(b) whether such thing has ever happended before;

(c) what was the propriety of holding the Press Conference at such a site;

(d) on what consideration Government permitted it; and

(e) wheher Government will take care not to permit such Nataki-Karan in future?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) to (e) US Commerce Secretary Mr. Ron Brown held an impromptu meeting with some members of the Press in front of Rashtrapati Bhawan on 17 January, 1995. No formal permission was requested for holding the informal and impromptu question and answer session.

Visa Fee raised by Saudi Arabia

418. SHRI K. R. MALKANI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that Saudi Arabia has raised the visa fee for Indians nationals from 50 Saudi Riyals (Rs. 450) to 1,000 Riyals (Rs. 9,500);

(b) whether it has raised the visa fee for the nationals of other countries also and if so, what extent;

(c) whether Government have registered a protest or propose to raise visa fee